

Narrator:

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The electoral process in Afghanistan recently took an important step forward after Afghan President Hamid Karzai agreed to participate in a runoff vote for the country's presidential election. President Obama issued a statement October 20th welcoming Karzai's decision, saying it strengthens Afghanistan's democracy. The second round of voting has been scheduled for November 7.

Following the August 20th election, Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission determined that Karzai had received a majority of votes, but was just short of the 50 percent of votes required to avoid a second round, or runoff vote.

The election is the first run by Afghans after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Despite threats from Taliban fighters and violence against civilians and security forces, millions of voters turned out to make their voices heard through the ballot box. But the process of counting the votes was delayed, as both Afghan and U.N.-backed electoral commissions investigated claims of voter fraud.

Obama said President Karzai's constructive actions established an important precedent for Afghanistan's new democracy by following the Afghan constitution. U.S. Senator John Kerry, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, arrived in Kabul on October 16th and held discussions with Karzai and the runner-up in the election, former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah.

In prepared remarks, Kerry, standing alongside Karzai and U.N. Special Representative to Afghanistan Kai Eide, said Afghanistan's future will ultimately be determined by Afghan's civilians and through good governance, not by soldiers or the international community. He called for strengthening the Afghan government's capacity to provide for its citizens. Along with President Karzai's commitments to reform, he said, the United States and the international community must be "true partners in this effort."

Eide, who heads the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said the electoral institutions and processes have functioned the way they should. He emphasized respect for the Afghan constitution, legal frameworks and institutions that have been put in place to help move the election process forward. This is especially important for a young democracy like Afghanistan, he said.

On the first stop of a three-nation European trip, Vice President Biden met with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Warsaw on October 21st. Biden said the new phased missile defense plan that President Obama has proposed for Europe is designed to meet a growing threat not only to the United States, but also to European allies.

At a joint press conference, Tusk said Poland views the new missile defense plan as very interesting and necessary, and that Poland is ready to participate at the appropriate scale. The components of the new configuration that will be placed in Poland will require ratification by the Polish Parliament.

On September 17th President Obama announced he would halt plans to install an advanced radar station in the Czech Republic and 10 ground-based missile interceptors in Poland. Instead, the United States would deploy a simpler system using proven technology. This new configuration is designed to address the more immediate threats posed by short-range and intermediate-range missiles.

Beginning in 2011, the new missile defense architecture will feature deployments of sea- and land-based missile interceptors, primarily upgraded versions of the U.S. Navy's existing Standard Missile-3, and a range of sensors in Europe to defend against the growing ballistic missile threat from countries like Iran. Current intelligence indicates that short- and medium-range missiles from Iran or other countries pose the greater threat to Eastern Europe.

While in Warsaw, Biden participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes that commemorates the Jewish uprising against Nazi occupation troops in 1943. Biden also is traveling to Bucharest, Romania, and Prague in the Czech Republic before returning to Washington.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently presented a comprehensive U.S. policy for resolving the conflicts in Sudan. The policy focuses on ending human rights abuses and genocide in the Darfur region, fully implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, and ensuring Sudan does not become a haven for violent extremists. The secretary said the United States has a menu of incentives and disincentives. These include both political and economic measures.

The situation in Sudan has emerged as one of the largest and most devastating humanitarian crises for the 21st century, the State Department said October 19th. More than 20 years of fighting between the government and rebels has killed more than 2 million people, and key parts of the 2005 peace agreement remain unfulfilled, a situation that could lay the foundation for future armed conflict.

According to the State Department, senior officials at participating agencies will assess a variety of indicators of progress every quarter. That assessment will include steps to increase support for positive change and to discourage backsliding. Progress will trigger steps designed to strengthen the hands of those implementing the changes. Failure to improve conditions will trigger increased pressure on those responsible, the State Department said.

The United States will be working with international partners to provide assistance for the April 2010 elections and the 2011 referendum. The referendum has the goal of achieving a peaceful Sudan or a smooth transition to two separate and viable states at peace with each other.

Along with providing assistance for voter registration and education, balloting, election monitoring and other services, the Obama administration will encourage Sudanese parties in the north and south to enact legal reforms to support a more credible electoral process. Other reforms would include working towards a transparent demarcation of the north-south border and developing a post-2011 wealth-sharing agreement between the two states.

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